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SUBJECT: EMBASSY MINSK WEEKLY REPORT - September 7, 2005

11. The following are brief items of interest compiled by Embassy Minsk over the past week.

Human Rights

12. Belarusian Trafficker Extradited from Spain

On September 2, Spanish police arrested and extradited a Belarusian woman suspected of involvement in an international ring that trafficked Belarusian women abroad. She purportedly recruited women to work as prostitutes in nightclubs outside of Belarus from 1998-12002. The woman fled from Belarus after authorities charged her and forbade her to travel abroad.

13. Party Activist Fined for Assembly

On August 30, the Brest regional court fined Belarusian Party of Communists activist Anatoly Novik BYR 1.02 million [USD 475] for a non-authorized assembly that the party held on July 9 to promote delegates for the National Congress of Democratic Forces. Even though the assembly was held indoors at a legal address and the police did not show up until after the event ended, the judge still found Novik guilty.

14. BTV Accuses Statkevich of Blocking Czech Loan to Belarus

On Septmber 2, opposition politician Nikolai Statkevich rejected recent accusations from Belarusian Television that he had used his contacts with the Czech Social Democratic Party to convince them in 2000 to deny a loan to the GOB to finance grain purchases. Statkevich said that the allegations were a lie and that he had always spoken out "against the economic isolation of Belarus."

Civil Society

15. Sergei Skrebets To Run for President

On September 7 in a letter to his brother, former MP and Respublika member Sergei Skrebets announced his intention to run for president in 2006. Skrebets' brother could not comment on how serious Skrebets is about his candidacy as Skrebets is currently being held in custody on bribery charges in a prison hospital.

16. Work Abroad Programs in Jeopardy

Out of the 40 entities that previously offered foreign employment services, the Ministry of Interior has only

re-registered three organizations and one individual proprietor as of September 1. These lucky four managed to meet the requirements - including direct contracts with foreign employers - set forth by Lukashenko's anti-trafficking decree. Six other employment agencies await responses from the MoI on the status of their applications for re-registration.

17. Not Leaving on a Jet Plane

On September 6, the Ministry of Sports and Tourism the licenses of 179 travel agencies operating in Belarus for failure to offer sufficient inbound tourism services. This requirement became mandatory for registration after Lukashenko stated that foreign tourism exceeded inbound tourism by 800% at his annual address to parliament.

18. Belarusian SWAT Team Trained to Pacify Riots

Interior Minister Vladimir Naumov stated on September 5 that Belarus' OMON (riot police) had just completed training on effective methods for dispersing mass demonstrations. The training drills ranged from drills pacifying a crowd at a football match to putting down a riot in a city.

19. Council to Coordinate Opposition Resources

On September 5, the opposition United Civic Party proposed to form a council to manage the resources and campaigning strategies of opposition parties during next year's presidential election. The council's executive committee would consist of prominent opposition figures and potential opposition candidates including former Agriculture Minister Vasily Leonov, ex-MP Valery Frolov,

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Chairman of the Belarusian Congress of Democratic Trade Unions Aleksandr Yaroshuk and educator Vladimir Kolos.

10. Lukashenko Allows Opposition Congress to Meet in Minsk

On September 9, Embassy received confirmation that Lukashenko instructed authorities to assist the opposition in organizing the single candidate presidential nomination congress in Minsk. The congress organizers had applied for permission to meet in Minsk, but had turned to Kiev when they did not get a response from Minsk city officials. Dismissing accusations that the government was playing petty games, Lukashenko stated, "I recommended that our authorities offer them [the congress organizers] assistance in conducting this event, so that they will not make fuss abroad in Ukraine, or Lithuania or Poland that they are stifled here, not allowed to hold [the congress]. Why should we obstruct? What is the point?"

Economics

11. Belarusian-Russian Economic Forum

On September 6, Minsk hosted the first Belarusian-Russian Economic program. Over 2,500 delegates were invited to discuss economic aspects of cooperation and integration and equal rights for Belarusian and Russian businesses. One source reported that the 600 Russian businessmen who attended already do business in Belarus, but were told by the GOB they must attend the forum if they want to keep doing business in Belarus.

12. No Loan from Russia to Cover Increased Gas Prices

Russia gave Belarus a USD 175 million loan to Belarus in

2004 to help cover rising natural gas costs. In 2005 Belarus asked for USD 146 million to offset the 18 percent increase in the cost of gas related to changing the way VAT was assessed between the two countries. However, the GOR officially refused to grant this loan, claiming the GOB is "capable of paying for the gas."

International Relations

¶13. Closer Ties Between Belarus and Iran

At a meeting between Belarusian Ambassador Leonid Rachkov and Chairman of the Iranian National Legislature Gholam Ali Haddad Adel on bilateral and regional cooperation on September 1, Adel discussed prospects of all-round cooperation between Belarus and Iran. He stated that the two countries "adhere to similar stances on many international problems: Tehran and Minsk are both concerned about NATO's eastward enlargement, are interested in the creation of a nuclear-free zone and support efforts to combat international terrorism."

¶14. Cooperation with NATO Not Top Priority for Military

On September 6, Assistant Defense Minister Sergey Bulygin stated cooperating with NATO and NATO's Partnership for Peace Program is not a main concern for the GOB Ministry of Defense (MoD). Instead, the MoD will focus on its partnership with Russia, participation in the Collective Security Treaty Organization, and cooperation with neighboring states.

Quote of the Week

¶15. On September 6 at a press conference, Belarus-Russia Union State Secretary Pavel Borodin responded to rumors he might be the next Russian Ambassador to Minsk:

"Are you serious?! I am the number three man in the Union State. What is so special about being an ambassador? There are 330 ambassadors and I am over 6 foot tall."

PHLIPOT